



THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER IN AFGHANISTAN: WHERE DOES CHINA STAND?

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Abstract

The Afghanistan takeover by the Taliban after the hasty and irresponsible US withdrawal starts a new debate among experts over the future of the country under hardcore Taliban. China a next door neighbor of Afghanistan, arguably, views the evolving situation of the country heedfully. The hasty withdrawal of the US for many experts is a part of the great power competition between the US and China where the former calculatedly desires to bring a civil war making Afghanistan an epicenter of terrorism and extremism that invariably would pose a grave threat to the latter's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China, on the other hand, appears to be wary of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Beijing hopes that the Taliban would crack down on the ETIM. Afghanistan's conundrum has certainly been creating innumerable challenges for Beijing but China is well known for handling the hard times. As the saying goes that "every challenge creates an equal opportunity", the emerging challenges of Afghanistan for China also create abundant opportunities. Moreover, the current situation in Afghanistan is also indicating more alliances in the region either new ones or strengthening the old ones. The Taliban want to be a part of China led economic web in the region to resist ongoing economic crisis where the west once again showing its back. This paper, thus, will analyze the threats emanating from Afghanistan to China and will also shed lights on China's role of preserving its core interest and rebuilding of war-torn Afghanistan.

Keywords: The US Withdrawal, Taliban, ISIS, Terrorism, Natural Resources, BRI.

Emerging Threats to China

1. Instable Afghanistan: A Grave Threat to BRI

Stable Afghanistan is in the best interest of China. It is not being a neighbouring country only, however, a proponent of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Xinjiang, the epicenter of BRI and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is the neighbouring province sharing border with Afghanistan. The US withdrawal and the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan brought an opportunity for China to help the later exploiting its \$3 trillion mineral reserves as per official estimates of 2017 (Sweeney, 2021) which is a win-win situation for both the states and on the other hand, a grave threat to Chinese trillion dollar project BRI as it is passing through Afghanistan's neighbouring countries. It also brought a responsibility of leadership in its backyard where bringing internal stability and preventing external interference will be a serious challenge.

China pledged \$31 million in aid to Afghanistan during the first virtual Foreign Ministers meetings on Afghanistan conducted by all its neighbouring states. The aid includes grain, winter supplies, vaccines and medicines (Korybko, 201). China does not want to help Afghanistan for its ambitions of natural resources only. It has long term strategic goals there. Prevent Afghan soil to become a heaven of terrorist sanctuaries, securing its economic projects in the country and beyond as well as filtering the region from the western presence and influence. China does want the global participation in Afghanistan's reconstruction and stability but not on the cost of its inclination towards the west or India or any other

opponent. Afghanistan's financial conditions will be deciding about the future of its internal and external security. All the regional stakeholders in Afghanistan are willing to connect the war-battered nation with economic web prevailing in the region. To achieve that dream, the Taliban are also aware of the resources. To be connected with BRI through CPEC or directly will be the ultimate solution of their financial conditions as the west will cut off all the aid to Afghanistan. China is seeing the Afghan instability a big threat to BRI.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in its latest Council of Heads of State meeting held in Dushanbe, Tajikistan on 17th September 2021 urged the world to help the uncertain economic situation in Afghanistan as previously it was depending upon aid mostly. Moreover, the US has frozen assets of Da Afghan Bank, the central bank of Afghanistan, creating more trouble for the Taliban to run their country. This can bring the current Afghan government towards drug trafficking and arms trade (Mohsin, 2021). World's major powers reiterated at the UNGA meeting held in September 2021 that inclusive government in Afghanistan is the solution for stability in Afghanistan.

2. Afghanistan Appears to be an Epicenter of Terrorism and Extremism

One can argue that Afghanistan has been the epicenter of terrorism as well as War on Terrorism (WoT) since long, however, prior to the hasty withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan, it was their concern being the victim of terrorism originating from the Afghan soil and champion of

WoT. Now, responsibility lies on the neighbours of Afghanistan particularly on China. It is mandatory to keep an eye on Afghanistan that its new government is not involved in terrorist activities and must not support such ideologies in the country. The Taliban have come through passing the extremist ideologies and now governing a war torn country where such activities are easy to occur.

Although the Taliban seem willing to bring changes in their ideological sphere, however, they still belong to that mindset. It will not be easy to tackle Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan. The US is giving indications of a possible alliance with the Taliban to tackle the scion of ISIS but it could be other way around. The US might be fueling the organizations to snag the establishing feet of China, Russia and other regional countries in Afghanistan. Instability in Afghanistan can cause issues for the region which is in America's favour. ISKP is not a stable terrorist outfit in Afghanistan however still has much to be concerned about. ISKP admitted attacks at the Kabul airport while the US forces were present there accompanied by the Taliban for airport's security. It was a huge incident in which 13 US soldier and 72 Afghans, including the Taliban members, were killed. ISKP accepted its responsibility which was a vigil of the starting of a new era (Aljazeera, 2021). ISKP is an active organization since the hasty withdrawal of the US forces from the country.

The Taliban lack in governance experience, legitimacy and international recognition and support. The current atmosphere might be supporting for newly emerging terrorist organizations under the fragile governance of the Taliban in Afghanistan. It will be difficult for the Taliban to counter such

issues in a terrain where they were masters of hiding but might not be in seeking. Taliban had mastery in guerilla war tactics but it is comparatively tough for an ex-guerilla force to capture and uproot a new guerilla force in their domain.

3. Support to ETIM and ISKP from Afghan Soil: Troublesome for China

ISKP is taking strong roots in Afghanistan and might be replacing the previous role of the Taliban. It will be a troublesome situation for China as the leaving powers might use it as a proxy against Afghanistan's current government as well as the neighbouring states. So, any kind of support to the ISKP, ETIM or any other such organization by the Taliban or any other external party might be dangerous for the region and particularly China while revoking its long-term objectives.

Analysts are of the view that China should not invest immensely in Afghanistan as it will be more risky, however, on the other hand, the Taliban are urging it to become a major stakeholder in the reconstruction of infrastructure in their country. It is not unforeseen that China is proactively involved there due to the rising concerns of violent activities in its western province. A strong alliance between ETIM and ISKP cannot be ruled out as both have similarity in their objectives. ISKP is determined to fight against the Taliban and any other stakeholder helping them. In this way, ISKP can collaborate with the ETIM and can create disturbance in China. and they can harm the Chinese Muslims in the province (Tanvir, 2021).

In the annual summit of SCO on 17th September 2021, Chinese President Xi reiterated on the SCO members to combat the menace of terrorism, extremism and separatism including the ETIM. He categorically mentioned the ETIM as it is the reason of grave worrisome for China (CGTN, 2021). China has already urged the Taliban to eliminate terrorism from its soil; moreover, Afghanistan must not be used by any terrorist organization against anyone. Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar vowed to prevent its country for any terrorist organization from operating, training or having sanctuaries (CGTN, 2021).

Islamist ideology is not confined to the political borders of any country but is applied on Muslims all over the world. 'One Ummah' concept is the core of hardliner's ideology which may overcome their current face being in desperate economic need. The Taliban are ready to collaborate with China extensively however doubts remain that they will be able to keep their promise; no help to terrorist organizations on Afghan soil and beyond including ETIM and no inclination towards the west or India.

4. The US Irresponsible and Hasty Withdrawal

The US has left the region with a job unfinished. It spent there 20 years fighting the Taliban and ultimately handing over the power to the same enemy by admitting its defeat. Now, the Taliban are committed to govern the state in modern way with internationally acceptable norms while lacking in experience and capacity. Their background of extremist ideology may not allow them to change altogether. A slow and lengthy

transitional phase is required to mould the attitude and methods of governance of the Taliban.

After coming into power, the Taliban urged the women and other sensitive factions of the society to be patient and not come to direct interactions with their soldiers as they have not been trained in that way yet. This clearly indicates the lack of capacity of the Taliban in governance which could be overcome with an inclusive government in Afghanistan. The inclusivity will bring some senior and mature politicians to bring such required changes in the Taliban. Clearly it was the job of the US to bring an inclusive government before leaving Afghanistan. The haste and the panic it showed will bring long-term impacts on the peace and stability of the region.

The US took a selfish decision and left its job incomplete. There was a process due upon America to bring the Taliban and Afghan civil government on a single page and transition to an inclusive government before leaving. Future of that government was unsure however a sincere try was required. Now, Mr Yue Xiaoyong, the special envoy for Afghan affairs of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, has rightly said that the US cannot deny the responsibility of the situation which has been developing in Afghanistan. It must take concrete steps for the rebuilding of the war-torn nation (CGTN, 2021).

Analysts of any background are criticizing the US for their haste in leaving the country without reaching a sustainable interim or regular government (Musavi, 2021). Captain Sam Brown, who served in

Afghanistan where his face was burned during fight, even compared the withdrawal with 'disappearing' from Afghanistan. He is specifically disappointed by the secret withdrawal from key air base Bagram without informing the new Afghan commander. He is of the view that President Biden and his administration must have planned it better (Brown, 2021).

5. The US and the Taliban Alliance against ISIS

In Afghanistan, the US and the Afghan government were fighting against the Taliban, but the situation has changed altogether in post-American withdrawal. The Taliban have gained authority and control over the country, but ISKP has announced a war against them. The ISKP emir Shahab al-Muhajir confirmed the terrorist campaign against the Taliban and their "American Masters" (Sayad, 2021). The main reason for the announcement is their ideological differences with the Taliban. The ISKP wants supremacy of the Salafist sect in Afghanistan and wants to base its legitimacy on ISIS leadership; while on the other hand, the Taliban want Hanafists and legitimacy of Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan (Jin, 2021). The ISKP accused the Taliban of leaving Jihad and battleground to negotiate peace between the US and the Taliban on "posh hotels" (Gardner, 2021). There are indications of the US-Taliban hidden cooperation against ISKP in Afghanistan after US withdrawal. Earlier, it might have provided intelligence for the US retaliatory drone attacks on ISKP as it claims Kabul airport attack. In this situation, there are chances of more instability in Afghanistan because of the US drone attacks on ISKP on Afghan soil with the Taliban underhand permission as their cooperation will exasperate ISKP (Hussain, 2021). The situation could

prove to be a nightmare for China as Afghanistan's stability is its core objective, and it wants to take benefit of the US withdrawal by extending its dream project BRI to Afghanistan. China understands that if there will be instability in Afghanistan, its rival countries can use them to oppose BRI, which is not in their interest (Haider, 2021). China is eyeing the trillion-dollar worth of natural resources in Afghanistan as there are the world's most extensive untapped resources of coal, iron, copper, lithium, gold, cobalt, mercury (Horowitz, 2021). Thus, China is playing a central role in creating stability by collaborating with the Taliban and its neighbouring countries, as they too have a stronghold in Afghanistan.

CHINA AS A GAME-CHANGER IN EMERGING GEO-POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF AFGHANISTAN

6. New Alliance of China-Pakistan and the Taliban for the Stability of Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, the withdrawal of the US has created a vacuum that China is going to fill with the Taliban and by providing open support to the new Afghan government; it is a clear indication that it is going to accept the government shortly. On the day the Taliban took over Kabul, a Chinese spokesperson said that we were ready to make "friendly and cooperative" relations with the new Afghan government, showing their intentions and eagerness (FP, 2021). With the support of Pakistan and other prominent regional countries, China is trying to create a stable Afghanistan that is in the interest of the whole region. With the US presence in Afghanistan, the belligerent nations of the region used it for their benefits and to created

problems and destruction for Afghanistan and other regional countries. Afghans always needed development and prosperity, but unfortunately, western countries poured in destruction. Now the Taliban are watching towards China for development as the Afghan spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid told to Italian media that "China is our most important partner and represents a fundamental and extraordinary opportunity for us because it is ready to invest and rebuild our country" (Mohanty, 2021).

On the other hand, Pakistan and China always tried to develop good-neighbourly, cooperative and friendly relations with Afghanistan, extending their full support to the Taliban government. After the announcement of the Taliban government in Afghanistan, China sends aid worth 200 million yuan, including the corona vaccine and food supplies (BBC, 2021). Pakistan was the most affected country because of Afghanistan instability, and now the Taliban government may fall into a severe humanitarian crisis as millions of Afghans are in urgent need of humanitarian aid. If the world does not act to stop the situation from deteriorating, then it can bring a massive outflow of refugees and complicate the prospect of building peace and security (Sajid, 2021). This is the reason that Pakistan sent three C-130 aircraft for humanitarian aid comprising of food and medicine (Tribune, 2021).

There are concerns of some regional countries on the Taliban government in Afghanistan. The fear of Russia about the Taliban government is the security prospect as it fears the spillover impacts of radical Islam from Afghanistan to the Central Asian States, which could become the problem of bringing instability on its doorstep. Under the circumstances, Russia

started strengthening its collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to counter the threat from Afghanistan and at the same time sent a gesture of friendly relations (Bochkov, 2021). The former secretary-general of CSTO, Nikolai Bordyuzha, said that "if we want peace in Central Asia, we need to talk to the Taliban," which indicate Russian stance about the Taliban.

There are two common things about the regional countries that they can develop Afghanistan very quickly; first, they are part of the SCO, a China and Russia led organization so they can work under that umbrella; second, none have shut down their embassy in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover which shows their intentions to work for Afghanistan (FP, 2021). The Russian defence minister now stressed to prioritize the security alliance to strengthen interaction within the bloc. Apart from Russian security prospect, China focuses mainly on economic benefits in Afghanistan (Hass, 2021). It wants to capitalize on power reshuffle by prompting BRI. In 2010, the Internal US department of defence memo called Afghanistan "Saudi Arabia of lithium" with a worth of at least \$1 trillion (McDonnell, 2021). The regional countries have a mutual interest in Afghanistan's stability. Russia is worried about violent activities in Central Asia, China and Pakistan and it is directly linked to internal stability in Afghanistan. The Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid, in his first news conference, said that it is understandable that the international community is concerned about security in Afghanistan, but the Taliban would not allow "soil of Afghanistan to be used against anyone" (BBC, 2021). The statement shows their full authority over

Afghanistan and intentions to work with the world, which is a perfect sign for the world.

7. New Alliance of China, Pakistan, Russia and Iran

With the declined influence of America in Afghanistan, all eyes are on regional powers like China, Pakistan, Russia and Iran, and their impact will see a natural rise as they have signaled enthusiasm in smooth relations with Afghanistan. After twenty years of turmoil, reconstruction of Afghanistan requires international cooperation, which means that participation in construction will not be a zero-sum game but rather a multinational cooperation process, especially for regional countries (Jiamei, 2021). There were different problems for every regional country because of the US presence in Afghanistan, and after its withdrawal, the countries are seeing several opportunities. The regional countries, especially China and Russia as the two most prominent regional players increase their foothold in Afghanistan by investing in creating connectivity and interdependence and Afghanistan need a lot (Hussain, 2021). China is setting a tune by stretching CPEC to Afghanistan, which will increase the possibility of peace and stability in the country through win-win cooperation.

In history, different powers like Mongols, British, Russians and the US/NATO tried to control and conquer Afghanistan, but they ended up in failure that is why Afghanistan is given the nickname "Graveyard of Empires" (Bearden, 2001). China, on the other hand, has a unique approach of non-interference, win-win situation and cooperation in

Afghanistan and does not want to see it as a heaven for terrorists. China intends to connect Afghanistan with every regional country from India to Iran via railway and road and does not have ambitions to rule it like other powers as it knows the importance of Afghanistan. Former Chinese Ambassador to Afghanistan Yao Jing stated in 2016 that "without Afghan connectivity, there is no way to connect China with rest of the world" (Li, 2021). For this reason, China is lobbying to increase cooperation between regional countries for development in Afghanistan. Following the rule "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", China and Russia are cooperating to undermine the US in Afghanistan (Sakhi, 2021). The countries will increase their influence in the region through bilateral and trilateral agreements keeping in mind the sensitivity of global power alliances. They will maintain their presence in the region to cater for the potential threats to their security (Sakhi, 2021). The Taliban government is also ready to improve the political relations with China, Russia and Iran (Miller, 2021). Iran, as one of the influential countries, has seen Afghanistan as a threat to its security.

8. Extension of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Afghanistan

China views Afghanistan as a crucial country when it comes to the extension of CPEC, a flagship project of the former's BRI. Previously, BRI was excluded from Afghanistan by virtue of security concerns amid Global War on Terror (GWOT). However, in 2016, a Memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed between China and Afghanistan, both countries agreed on several initiatives as far as BRI was concerned.

Although, remarkable progress so far has not been made because of the deteriorating security situation of Afghanistan and lack of a proper communication network. (Jun & Daye, 2021) The dynamics of the region are under rapid changes after the hasty US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The current interim government of Afghanistan is disparately seeking international recognition, especially from regional powers. In this crucial time, China is in a position to play the role of a game-changer in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the region.

China's core interest in BRI in Afghanistan revolves around cementing its soft position. Even after the takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, China announced that it was ready for a cordial relationship with Afghanistan even kept its embassy open. If the security situation in Afghanistan is improved, China, by and large, would extend the CPEC projects to Afghanistan. The inclusion of CPEC to Afghanistan will remain a win-win model for all three countries- China, Pakistan and Afghanistan. China's ambition to make Afghanistan a part of CPEC is applicable; the country remains a gateway to Central Asian countries and the West Asian Corridor. Afghanistan has the potential to serve the economic interests of China as a potential trade route. (Marsden, 2021) On the other hand, CPEC connectivity with Afghanistan will also, create a conducive environment for the successful implementation of CPEC projects in Pakistan by reducing the security threats from the western border. If the security situation remains unstable in Afghanistan it will ultimately jeopardize the CPEC completion. Therefore, Afghanistan's stability has become a prerequisite for the smooth progress and development of CPEC and

cordial relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan will play a vital role in this regard.

Afghanistan, under the current juncture, also needs economic stability to revive the economy of a war-torn state. Taliban seem to be interested in collaboration and cooperation and looking forward to the international community. Against this backdrop, China is a crucial player in the rebuilding of Afghanistan. China being a major investor would not enter into any agreement unless the Taliban ensure that its soil would not be used for violence. China, thus, is concerned about the future of Afghanistan, without a stable Afghanistan the trilateral cooperation could not reach to the desired objectives. The future of CPEC, arguably, is dependent on the stability of Afghanistan and for that purpose, Taliban need to ensure there will be no breeding ground for militancy. (Jones & Blanchette, 2021)

9. Projection of China's soft power in Afghanistan

China being a benign power leaves no stone unturned to project its soft power in Afghanistan. Its foreign policy tilts towards peaceful co-existence and cooperation rather than competition. Beijing has been showcasing its soft stance towards Afghanistan willing to engage with the Taliban government if they ensure the protection of human rights. Previously, China did not recognize the Taliban government because of fundamentalism and the Taliban's association and support to the militant groups. Meanwhile, China being an emerging power tries to fill the vacuum created by the US, projecting its soft power, shunning the direct intervention and re-building the country after the US intervention will

pave the way for winning the hearts and minds of the people of Afghanistan. In an attempt to materialize, the opportunity China is coordinated with Kabul with a well-resourced effort to build Beijing soft power image in the region. There is also a possibility that China is likely to use the same model it used in Africa for economic corporation and prosperity. It will not only bolster the soft power of China in the region but will also counter the Indian influence in the region.

Apart from BRI, constructions of railroads, ports, regional connectivity, including many soft components ranging from health and education to human resource development. In order to implement such projects, China demands Taliban need to have an inclusive government. Without an inclusive government, China will remain reluctant to make heavy investments in Afghanistan. If the Taliban desire to win the confidence of China, they need to change their approach on education as education remains a top priority in China's model. Participants of BRI are also given several incentives to bring reform and prioritize the education system. China made a tremendous achievement in education. Over the last 30, the gross school enrollment rate was only 3%, which rose to 53% in 2019, currently; China is at the top of Programmed for International Student Assessment PISA rankings. China's progress in education has won the laurels in the soft power domain.

China wants the Taliban to soften their stance on the position of women and ensure their empowerment such a move of China will strengthen China's soft image. Taliban are also expected to ensure the rights of ethnic and religious minorities. In past, the Taliban were accused of ethnic

cleansing and segregation against Hazaras, Shias and Uzbeks. Before agreeing upon any agreement China would want to see the commitment in the aforementioned areas. Unlike the US, China's non-interference policy has projected a soft image of the former and Beijing will follow the same path by not interfering in Afghanistan that will in building a soft image of the former.

10. Chinese Marshal Plan a game-changer for Afghanistan

The evolving situation in Afghanistan compels the regional powers to realize the vulnerability of current scenario. The emerging dynamics are going to have long-lasting impacts on the stability and peace of the whole region. Afghanistan is facing some issues at both external and internal fronts. In order to address the internal issues, it needs economic assistance and for that purpose, the way US supported Europe after the devastating WWII, the Chinese Marshal Plan can work as a game-changer for Afghanistan. To restore peace in Afghanistan, there is a dire need for something extraordinary for the purpose of addressing the sufferings of the Afghan nation. The most potent action that any nation could take in this regard is to offer a well-executed multi-billion dollars Marshal Plan for Afghanistan. For that purpose, China is already normalizing its ties with Afghanistan and gives a notion that it will expand its engagements with Kabul. China is also pushing the international community especially the US to assist the war-torn country. (Gersen, 2021)

According to Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the US and its allies need to understand the exacerbating situation of Afghanistan and work

with the international community to ensure economic, livelihood, and humanitarian assistance on an urgently basis. He further reiterated that new political settlement in Afghanistan should start working on an urgent basis in order to maintain security and stability in the state. (PTI, 2021). While, Beijing has already pledged to contribute to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Against this backdrop, China needs assurances from the Taliban government that they will not let Afghanistan's land become a breeding ground of extremism and militancy. If the Taliban assure that, they will not support any terrorist group; it will pave the way for Chinese Marshal Plan, which will not only address the grievances of Afghani people but also resolve the internal instability and other issues of the country.

11. Chinese humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan

Since the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, China is eloquently supporting the Taliban. Taliban also call China as a friendly country and welcoming soft gesture as well as its investment for reconstruction. During the US withdrawal, China kept its embassy operational in Kabul. Recently, Chen Xu, ahead of Chinese Mission to UN at Geneva envoy told the High-level Ministerial Meeting on the Humanitarian Situation in Afghanistan that "China will continue to respect the Afghan people's wish and needs and do its best to support Afghanistan in its peaceful reconstruction and economic development" (Bureau, 2021).

On a humanitarian basis, China has also announced providing emergency aid to Afghanistan worth approximately \$31m including corona virus

vaccines. The aid will also include food, medicines and winter supplies. Owing to the diplomatic, economic and humanitarian assistance from China, the Taliban say that Beijing would be a main partner in the region for the development and reconstruction of the war-ravaged country. (Hashimi, 2021)

In the meanwhile, most states adopt the policy of wait and see towards Afghanistan, China is continuously providing aid through diplomatic and economic means. Some analysts regard Chinese aid a long-term investment in Afghanistan to guard its geostrategic and geo-economics interests in the region. However, stability and hard stance against militancy is required by the Taliban side to build cordial relations with China.

12. Extraction of Afghanistan Natural Resources

The US hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan and the recapturing of Kabul by the Taliban on August 15, 2021, has embarked on a path to a new debate on the extraction of the country's untapped natural resources. The question remains that how are the Taliban going to extract the untapped natural resources of Afghanistan? Taliban, in this regard, require China's support to extract untapped natural resources of the country. According to a former mines minister of Afghanistan, the country has US\$3 trillion natural resources. The country is rich in resources like rare earth, oil, lithium, uranium, gold copper, natural gas chromium, bauxite, coal, iron ore, lead, zinc, gypsum gemstones, talc, Sulphur, marble and travertine. (Daly & Singh, 2021)

Taliban, arguably, are untrained and lack technological advancement to extract natural resources have constantly been requesting the international community for humanitarian assistance and economic aid. Under such circumstances, when the US left a vacuum for China, the latter by all means will jump at the opportunity by extracting natural resources of the country. After the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the local media of the country had reported that Beijing was obsessed with USD 1 trillion of untapped minerals in Afghanistan. An op-ed written by Zhou Bo, a senior colonel in the People's Liberation Army opined that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan had enabled Beijing to support the war-torn country. Bo further reiterated that China was unmatched in infrastructure and industry building and the Beijing would certainly have easy access to US 1 trillion untapped natural resources of Afghanistan. (ANI, 2021)

The usage of lithium in the prevailing era of science and technology would increase exponentially; the rising power China embroiled with the US in great power competition is expected to be leaving no stone unturned to capitalize on the lithium of Afghanistan. An internal memo of the US Department in 2010 described Afghanistan as the "Saudi Arabia of Lithium". (Digital, 2021). China appears to be having intentions of forging better ties with the Taliban. China supersedes other regional players in the extraction of Afghanistan's untapped natural resources due to its robust economy and technological advancement. Intriguingly, Beijing has been the largest producer of lithium cells in the world and is the absolute leader in mining rare earth. In the prevailing great power competition between the US and China, the stakes that remain in the competition would be

technology dominance in the global energy transition. In this context, Afghanistan remains a crucial country for the technological dominance of China. (Patonia, 2021)

13. Way Forward/ Suggestions

- China should invest in Afghanistan with great vigilance and should not give the Taliban a free hand on their projects.
- Economic assistance to the Taliban should be strictly linked to non-cooperative attitude to the all proscribed organizations within country and beyond.
- The Taliban should be convinced for an inclusive government for a long and peaceful solution to the governance issue as Pakhtuns make less than 50 percent of Afghanistan's linguistic and ethnic segment. It will enhance the Taliban's legitimacy and international recognition.
- The Taliban need to respect the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights to progress smoothly with the international recognition and aid.
- China, as leading regional power and rival of the US, needs to take lead in all the matters of Afghanistan where external help and representation is required.
- Afghanistan is cooperating with US against ISKP to get its control over country and get US recognition of its government but they must careful as this might become difficult for them to control ISKP through force

- US wants destabilization in Afghanistan so China should act as a responsible regional power by providing maximum economic and political support to Afghanistan to stabilize their government as destabilization is not in interest of China and the region
- China should unite all the regional countries including India and minimize the differences to work for the betterment of the region and ultimately for world peace

Conclusion

Hasty and irresponsible withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan is creating strategic implications not for the Afghan government but the region and for the world as well. Now, responsibility lies on the neighbours especially China to handle the situation carefully and foresightedly. China is bound to respond to the current scenario after the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan as its commitments and economic engagements to the regional states. Securing BRI, stopping ISKP from infiltration and preventing ETIM from violence are the prime objectives China seeks in the US post-withdrawal era.

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